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THE NEGRO  
IN THE  
AMERICAN  
REVOLUTION

*Herbert Aptheker*



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## I. INTRODUCTION

The desire for freedom is the central theme, the motivating force, in the history of the American Negro people. This has always determined their actions, policies and efforts, and has, indeed, permeated their religions, inspired their real and legendary heroes, and filled their incomparably beautiful hymns and spirituals.

Centuries of unspeakable suffering and dire privation have developed among the American Negro people an unlimited sympathy for all progressive movements and an impelling, urgent yearning for their own liberation. These things are true now and they were true at the birthing-time of our nation.

The chain-breaking features of the First American Revolution—its denunciation of aristocracy, its separation of Church and State, its espousal of a nation's right to self-determination, its overthrow of feudal hangovers, its promise of liberty and equality, its proud avowal of man's right and ability to direct his own destiny and guide his own pursuit of happiness here and now, not hereafter and in some nebulous beyond—won the whole-hearted support of the Negro people. Those among them who were free rushed forward to offer their services and one of them, an escaped slave named Crispus Attucks (in whom, fittingly enough, flowed white and Indian blood as well as Negro), was the first to die challenging the rule of Britain, falling dead in Boston, his chest pierced by two bullets, five years before the Battle of Lexington.

But the Negro people, particularly the vast majority who were slaves, were to meet disappointment. They were to learn that many of the Revolutionists who cried "liberty, equality," meant to add, "for whites only," and that some did not even mean that. Gouverneur Morris, for example, wrote in 1774 that "The mob begins to think and reason. Poor reptiles! it is with them a vernal morning; they are struggling to cast off their winter's slough, they bask in the sunshine and ere noon they will bite." And Morris was not going to be bitten, if he could avoid it. Still others, who were also part of this First American Revolution, bought and sold and branded and beat and owned human beings and meant to go right on owning men and women (while talking about freedom and equality).

Thus it came about that the Negro people played what at first glance appears to have been a dual role here from 1775 to 1783. Where and when possible, that is, where and when they were permitted to do so, and given freedom for doing so, Negroes served the forces which were in rebellion against British tyranny, but where and when this was not possible they fled to the British armies, or to Florida, or to Canada, and some actually fought in the King's army. And where this, too, was not possible, some fled into neighboring swamps, forests, and mountains resisting whomsoever sought to re-enslave them; still others, finding escape impossible, conspired or rebelled for freedom.

But these varied and superficially contradictory activities have one common origin, one set purpose—the achievement of liberty—this was and is the American Negro's guiding star. With this in mind let us examine the activities of these 500,000 inhabitants of a nation in rebellion, a nation whose total population, Negro and white, was only two and a half millions.

## II. THE GROWTH IN ANTI-SLAVERY FEELING

The struggle of the American colonies for political and economic freedom from Great Britain gave a considerable impetus to the anti-slavery movement. This was anxiously watched and, where possible, aided by the Negro people themselves. In order fully to appreciate the role of the Negro in the American Revolution it is necessary to trace the story of this development and to observe that while some definite advancement was made yet no general clear-cut victory was achieved.

In the early literature, setting the stage for the revolutionary upsurge, notice is taken of the inconsistency in struggling for political and economic freedom while depriving hundreds of thousands of their personal freedom. This may, for example, be found in the writings of James Otis, the early leading theoretician of the Revolution, who, in his famous pamphlet called *Rights of the British Colonies* published in Boston in 1764, denounced slavery, affirmed the Negro's inalienable right to freedom and, at least by implication, upheld his right instantly to rebel against his enslavers.

Some of the later literature became even more bold, as when the Reverend Isaac Skillman in his *Oration upon the Beauties of Liberty* (published in Boston in 1772, and in its fourth printing by 1773) demanded the immediate abolition of slavery. In this work the reverend gentleman went as far as abolition literature was ever to go in asserting the slave's



right to rebel, for, said he, this act would conform "to the laws of nature."

These same years witnessed the height of Anthony Benezet's anti-slavery work, as well as that of Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush, each of whom widely spread his views. It is also an interesting sign of the spirit of the times to note that the addresses delivered at the commencement exercises of Harvard University at Cambridge, Massachusetts, in July, 1773 were concerned with "the legality of enslaving the Africans." Similar sentiments were expressed by Abigail Adams in telling her husband, John, in September, 1774, upon the discovery of a slave conspiracy in Boston, that "it always appeared a most iniquitous scheme to me to fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have."

And it is to be remembered that the first article Thomas Paine, the international tribune of the people, ever wrote for publication was entitled "African Slavery in America" and appeared in a Pennsylvania paper of March 8, 1775. In this work Paine denounced slavery, demanded that it be abolished and that the Negroes be given land and the opportunity of earning a livelihood as well as personal liberty.

There are, too, besides these instances of individual protest (and the above is meant only as a sampling of that type of anti-slavery activity) many evidences of organized opposition to the institution of slavery during the Revolutionary period. Of very considerable importance in this activity, even during this early period, was the work of the Negro people themselves. We have, for example, evidence in John Adams' diary note of November 5, 1766, that Massachusetts slaves attempted, by bringing an action of trespass in the local courts against their masters, to challenge the entire legal concept of slavery. Adams, in reporting his own presence at

one such unsuccessful effort, remarked that he had "heard there have been many." But this type of action proved futile.

The Negro people then turned to the application of mass pressure by the presentation of petitions to the legislatures appealing for liberation. There is record of at least eight such attempts, the first of which, appealing for the possibility of earning money with which to purchase freedom, was presented to the Massachusetts General Court in April, 1773. Two months later other slaves petitioned Governor Gage and the same General Court to grant them their freedom, together with land, for, said the Negroes, "they have in common with other men a natural right to be free." Still another "Petition of a Grate Number of Blackes" reached these same individuals in May, 1774, again asking for freedom as a natural right and denouncing slavery as sinful and evil. The next month, and the next year, still other petitions, of similar tenor, were presented.

In the Spring of 1775 the Negroes of Bristol and Worcester in Massachusetts petitioned the Committee of Correspondence of the latter County to aid them in obtaining freedom. This resulted in a convention held in Worcester on June 14 at which it was resolved by the white inhabitants present "That we abhor the enslaving of any of the human race, and particularly of the Negroes in this country, and that whenever there shall be a door opened, or opportunity present for anything to be done towards the emancipation of the Negroes, we will use our influence and endeavor that such a thing may be brought about." Again, in January, 1777, many slaves of Massachusetts presented to the Council and House of Representatives of that State a prayer for freedom remarking that "they Cannot but express their Astonishment that It has Never Bin Considered that Every Principle from which America has Acted in the Cours of

their unhappy Deficulties with Great Britain Pleads Stronger than A thousand arguments in favours of your petioners."

Finally, so far as the available records show, there was the interesting petition for liberty presented by twenty Negroes of Portsmouth in November, 1779, to the New Hampshire legislature. This declared, in the precise reasoning of the Revolutionary movement itself, "That the God of Nature gave them life and freedom, upon the terms of most perfect equality with other men; That freedom is an inherent right of the human species, not to be surrendered, but by consent, for the sake of social life."

Protests against slavery having an organized and mass origin also arose from the midst of the white people. Thus the religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, made considerable advances during the years of the Revolution towards wiping slavetrading and slaveholding out of their group and by about 1785 this had generally been accomplished.

Governmental groups also took some steps in that direction. In 1770 several petitions urging the end of slavery were received by the Connecticut legislature, which the next year forbade the slave trade. The New Jersey Assembly also received, in 1773, anti-slavery petitions from groups of citizens in six counties. Rhode Island declared, in 1774, that any Negro slave thereafter brought into the region was to be free, and the preamble to this law stated that this action was taken because "the inhabitants of America are generally engaged in the preservation of their own rights and liberties, among which that of personal freedom must be considered as the greatest, and as those who are desirous of enjoying all the advantages of liberty themselves should be willing to extend personal liberty to others." It is, however, to be observed that the law did not free the slaves (of which there were some 3,500) then in Rhode Island, though later legis-

lation permitting them to join the army did, as we shall see, have the effect of liberating several hundreds of Negroes in that state.

Other legal acts or declarations of an anti-slavery outlook were common. The Braintree, Massachusetts, town meeting, for example, early in 1774, adopted a resolution promising to abstain from the slave trade and to boycott all who engaged in that business. Within a year of this action other localities, as Providence, Rhode Island; Chester County, Pennsylvania; and Delaware and Georgia either considered or passed similar measures. The New York City delegation to the Provincial Congress of the State, headed by John Jay, future first Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, urged, in 1777, the adoption of a gradual emancipation law. This came close to adoption and might well have been passed had not John Jay himself been forced to absent himself due to the death of his mother. Twenty-two years were to pass before New York enacted such a law.

The constitution adopted in Vermont in July, 1777, contained a specific clause appended to the Declaration of Rights directly forbidding the enslavement of any individual, whether "born in this country or brought from over sea." In 1780 an emancipation bill was considered by the Connecticut legislature. A law gradually abolishing slavery, and written by Thomas Paine and George Bryan, was passed in Pennsylvania on March 1, 1780.

The liberty and equality clauses in the Massachusetts constitution of 1781 and in the New Hampshire constitution of 1784 were generally considered to have ended, for all practical purposes, the institution of slavery in those states, while in the latter year, 1784, Connecticut enacted a gradual emancipation law. It is also to be noted that Virginia in May, 1782, considerably eased the requirements for the manumis-

sion of slaves, but this liberal law, under which hundreds of Negroes were granted their freedom, was repealed within five years.

Similar tendencies came forward too, though rather weakly, on the national scene. Thus, part of the agreement reached in the Continental Association of 1774 called for an end to the foreign slave trade as an expression of both an anti-slavery and an anti-British feeling, the latter because the commerce in slaves was, to a considerable extent, carried on by English merchants. The Continental Congress repeated this action in April, 1776, by resolving that the importation of slaves should stop.

There was, of course, latent anti-slavery sentiment in the final Declaration of Independence, particularly in its brave assertions "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." It is, moreover, interesting to note that Jefferson's original draft of this immortal manifesto of revolution contained an overt and powerful anti-slavery declaration. In his list of grievances against the British monarch, Jefferson had originally included this statement:

He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of *infidel* powers, is the warfare of this *Christian* king of Great Britain determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold.

But this was, at the request of delegates from South Carolina and Georgia, and certain of the slave-trading New

England states, deleted from the final copy. Other acts of an even more reprehensible character must be told if we are to understand the actions of a huge number of slaves in seeking freedom where they could—and particularly by flight to the armies of the British.

North Carolina, for example, passed a law in 1777 making the manumission of slaves difficult because “the evil and pernicious Practice of freeing Slaves in this State, ought at this alarming and critical Time to be guarded against by every friend and Well-wisher to his Country.” South Carolina, in 1780, reached the depths of infamy, for it then passed a law granting a prime slave as part of the bounty to be given to soldiers volunteering for service in the Revolutionary army. As a matter of fact, this state, together with Georgia, made a practice of partly paying their officials’ salaries by giving them slaves.

It may then be declared that the Negro people did receive some benefits from their own agitational efforts and from the increase in anti-slavery sentiment that accompanied the Revolutionary movement, but it is necessary to observe that these benefits generally came late in the period, were rarely far-reaching, and that the attitude of the Southern states, where, of course, the real evil of slavery was concentrated, was not one warranting hope or enthusiasm on the part of the Negro people. Where the Negro could serve his native land and obtain his freedom he gladly did so, but where he discovered that his native land denied him his craving for liberation he turned elsewhere—to arson, rebellion, flight—for it was liberty he wanted, not high-sounding speeches.

### III. EFFORTS FOR FREEDOM

#### SPECIAL PRECAUTIONS OF THE SLAVOCRACY

Any unusual excitement always resulted in increased restlessness and more widespread disaffection among America's slaves. The era of the Revolution is an outstanding example of that fact. The slaveowners knew this and accordingly adopted extraordinary precautions. They knew, as two of them, Archibald Bullock and John Houston, told John Adams on November 24, 1775, that were an officer to land his army within the Southern slave area "and proclaim freedom to all the Negroes who would join his camp, twenty thousand Negroes would join it...in a fortnight." For, as these same men remarked, "The Negroes have a wonderful art of communicating intelligence among themselves; it will run several hundreds of miles in a week or fortnight."

The slave area always operated under strict military, legal, and social systems of control (which have been described in the present writer's *Negro Slave Revolts in the United States*, pp. 13-15, International Publishers, New York, 1939) but during this period of turmoil special safeguards were instituted.

A general policy of removing the slave population from zones close to the British armies was followed. Thus, the Virginia Committee of Safety ordered on April 10, 1776, the removal of all slaves above thirteen years of age from the eastern counties of Norfolk and Princess Anne further inland and away from the British forces. The Congress of

North Carolina a month later ordered that masters compel all adult male slaves south of Cape Fear River to move further inland, "into the country, remote from the Sea." In September, 1777, the Council of Virginia after reciting the fact that "many Negroes" had fled, empowered the Governor to cause them to be moved whenever and wherever he pleased. The Assembly of Virginia, moreover, passed an act making it possible for planters of other states to ship their slaves to the interior of Virginia, and it is certain that this was taken advantage of by some in Georgia and the Carolinas.

Virginia also, in December, 1775, passed an act permitting the sale, banishment, or execution of Negroes caught attempting to flee. And this law was enforced as is demonstrated by the hanging in March, 1776, of four captured runaways, and the sale and transportation to the West Indies, in January, 1776, of about twenty-five others. The money from these sales was turned over to their masters "provided they are not unfriendly to American liberty"! Sale and banishment of Negroes caught attempting to gain their liberty by flight occurred elsewhere, as in Albany, New York, in March, 1778, when four slaves were so treated. Three others involved in the same effort received fifty lashes each.

Other special precautions were used as when Georgia, in August, 1776, confined certain Negro pilots and stationed a guard boat in Savannah "to prevent Negroes from going down to Cockspur," an island off which were stationed enemy vessels. Similar action was taken elsewhere, as in St. Mary's County, Maryland, from whence an officer reported in March, 1781, that he had posted guards "at the most convenient places to prevent the Negroes from going to the Enemy & Secured all Boats & Canoes." Another officer that same month asked Maryland's Governor for sixty more men



to be kept "constantly patrolling" in St. Mary's County in order to prevent the flight of slaves, "as from the late conduct of the Negroes when those ships (of the British) were in St. Marys I am well satisfied the greatest part of them that are in the County would join them."

## FLIGHT

Yet with all this—the lashes, deportations, hangings, forcible removals, added patrols, withdrawal of boats—tens of thousands of slaves succeeded in escaping, but too often, the evidence demonstrates, only to meet bad treatment, disease and death, and even, some evidence seems to show, sale into West Indian slavery, at the hands of the British. It is indeed likely that news of the evils generally awaiting slaves who managed to reach the English forces did more to discourage flight, in that particular direction, than all the repressions and precautions practiced by the Revolutionists.

References to and complaints about the wholesale flight of slaves may be observed as soon as the fighting began. The royal governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, attempted to cripple the revolution by offering, in a public proclamation of November 7, 1775, to give freedom to the slaves of all "rebels" who were able to bear arms and who reached his lines. The Virginia Committee of Safety, realizing the gravity of the situation, promptly issued a counter-proclamation. This warned the slaves not to heed Dunmore's offer, and pointed out that Great Britain herself owned slaves whom it did not offer freedom, that she had been the greatest stimulator of the slave trade and had, indeed, vetoed Virginia's efforts at suppressing that trade. Moreover, said Virginia's proclamation, Dunmore's offer extended only to the adult male slaves (who would thus have to abandon their

families) of the "rebels," not of the Tories, and he probably would betray the promise anyway and ship the Negroes to the West Indies. Added to this appeal, as has been mentioned, was Virginia's law of December, 1775, providing banishment or execution as the penalties for captured fugitive slaves.

Nevertheless the passion for liberty among the Negro people was so great, the yearning for freedom burned so intensely within them, that literally thousands immediately attempted to flee. The prominent Virginian, Edmund Pendleton, told Richard Henry Lee on November 27, 1775, that "slaves flock to him [Dunmore] in abundance," and two weeks later an American lady told her London friend that: "The flame runs like wild fire through the slaves." Local Virginia county committees in November and December, 1775, like those of Northampton and Warwick also refer to the wholesale exodus of the slave population. The letters of Dunmore himself testify to this same situation and add the tragic information that most of the fugitives found disease and death instead of freedom within the British lines. As one example may be cited Dunmore's letter written June 26, 1776, from Gwin's Island Harbor, Virginia, to Lord Germaine, the British Secretary of State, which declared that many slaves had fled to him but that sickness "has carried off an incredible number of our people, especially the blacks."

Similar conditions prevailed elsewhere. The Georgia Council of Safety on July 5, 1776, complained of the general flight of the slaves of eastern Georgia. Again, the comment of an American officer, Major Thomas Price, in a letter to the Maryland Council of Safety, is illuminating. He stated on July 23, 1776, that: "A valuable Negro made his escape from us last night, he not being so well guarded as he ought to

have been.... The shores are full of dead bodies, chiefly Negroes," washed ashore from the British boats. A little later, September 9, 1776, a Mr. Charles Read of Burlington, New Jersey, advertised the flight of his slave, Moses, and added this note, "As he has been endeavoring to prevail upon the Negroes in this Neighbourhood to go with him, and join the ministerial army, it is hoped every lover of his country will endeavor to apprehend so daring a villain."

These efforts to gain freedom by flight continued throughout the war years. Thus, we find the Council of the Virginia legislature referring on September 5, 1777, to the escape of "many Negroes" from "the Counties of Northampton and Accomack on the Eastern shore" and expressing fear that "many more will follow their Example." Similar references to flights recur in the Council records of Maryland during 1777 and 1778. And a Mr. Tazewell wrote in June, 1779, from Williamsburg of the flight of five hundred slaves from Norfolk County, Virginia. The march of General Prevost's British army through South Carolina in 1779 likewise resulted in the flight of thousands of slaves with, again, abominable conditions and treatment leading to the deaths of hundreds. It is also to be noted that Tories who fled from territory under the domination of the revolutionists, particularly in South Carolina and Georgia, and attempted to take their slaves with them, suffered great losses by the flight of the Negroes, many of whom met death through disease and starvation.

To the very days of the cessation of fighting this desperate exodus went on. Glimpses of the story break through, as the conviction of a slave, Jack, of Botetourt County, Virginia, in April, 1780, of attempting to lead many slaves to Cornwallis' army and of his being sentenced to hang. Up in Albany, New York, six Negroes were jailed in May, 1780, for at-

tempting, with the aid of a white man named Joseph Bettis, to flee to Canada. Down in Virginia, that same month, according to Joseph Jones, slaveholders still complained because of "their Negroes flying from them," while in November, 1780, Lt. Col. Murfree told Governor Nash of North Carolina that "A great many (North Carolina) Negroes goes (sic) to the Enemy." Again in July, 1781, another Virginian, Richard Henry Lee, told his brother William that "Your neighbors Colo. Taliaferro & Colo. Travis lost every slave they had in the world, and Mr. Paradise has lost all his but one. This has been the general case of all those who were near the enemy."

Some idea of the extent of this flight over the whole period of the Revolution may be obtained by considering certain contemporary figures. Thus, for example, after the Treaty of Paris of 1783 ending the war, the British armies sailed away from New York City with well over three thousand escaped Negroes, for the United States commissioners, sent to discover how many fugitives were aboard the ships of the British fleet in that harbor, actually counted 2,997, while whole ships full were secretly dispatched by British officers who feared their government might have to pay for each Negro taken away. (The question of reparation for slaves who reached English forces was a sore one between Great Britain and the United States for several years, but England refused to compensate this government.) When the British fleet evacuated Savannah, Georgia, in July, 1782, it carried away some five thousand escaped slaves, and about six thousand five hundred Negroes sailed away in 1783, when the British withdrew from Charleston, South Carolina. In addition, it is to be kept in mind that all through the seven years of fighting ships filled with escaped slaves were again and again sent to Florida, the West Indies, England, and Nova

Scotia by the British, in practically all cases, unfortunately, to suffer fearful oppression as peons, if not actually slaves. Many, moreover, fled to areas within the United States, and to the armies of the French ally, as well as to the British.

Contemporary estimates of total losses offer further enlightenment. Thomas Jefferson declared that in the one year of 1778 Virginia alone saw thirty thousand slaves flee from bondage, and we know that many more escaped both before and after that year. Georgians felt that from 75 to 85 per cent of their slaves (who numbered about fifteen thousand in 1774) fled, and South Carolinians declared that of their total number of some one hundred and ten thousand slaves at the start of the Revolution, at least twenty-five thousand made good their escape. It is certainly a fact that although South Carolina imported slaves by the thousands in the years immediately after the Revolution she did not again have as many slaves as she had had in 1773 until the year 1790. If to all this one adds the slaves who escaped from North Carolina, Maryland, Delaware, and the Northern states, particularly New York and New Jersey, it appears to be conservative to say that from 1775 until 1783 some one hundred thousand slaves (*i.e.*, about one out of every five) *succeeded* in escaping from slavery, though very often meeting death or serfdom instead of liberty.

It was very fortunate for the revolutionary cause that political and economic considerations restrained the British from actively waging an anti-slavery war and thus gaining twice or three times the number of refugees she did and actively using them against the Americans. But it is to be borne in mind that the English empire was itself the enslaver of tens of thousands of Negroes in the West Indies and that many of the Tories in the Southern area were large slaveholders.

These Tory and West Indian slaveholders needed British aid in maintaining their ownership of the Negroes (the British fleet and troops stationed in the West Indies were absolutely necessary for the security of slavery there, and this was an important consideration in the minds of discontented Islanders for not joining their Continental brethren in rebellion against British imperialism—a reminder of this came to Jamaica in 1776 in the form of a serious slave revolt) and thus it was that the English offered freedom only to male adult slaves of the rebels, treated even them badly, and enlisted few as soldiers. Several hundred American Negroes did, however, secure their liberty by serving in the British armies, particularly those of Dunmore in Virginia, Prevost in Georgia, and Leslie in South Carolina.

## OTHER FORMS OF STRUGGLE

Contemporary evidence demonstrates that not a few of the slaves fled to neighboring swamps, forests, and mountains and at times waged their own guerrilla warfare against slaveholders. Thus an engagement between twenty-one maroons (on whose side fought five unidentified whites) and slaveholders was reported from eastern Georgia in September, 1776, with, it was said, two slaveholders and eleven Negroes being killed.

North Carolina passed a law in 1778 permitting the hunting, capturing, and sale of all fugitives and explained that this was needed for "many Negroes are now going at large to the Terror of the good People of this State." A letter from George Washington to General John Stark of October 8, 1778, wishing that General's subordinate, Colonel Butler, good fortune in a contemplated attack on the Unadilla settlement of Mohawk Indians in Otsego County, New York,

indicates the importance that was attached to the destruction of that place which had become a refuge for runaway slaves. There is also reference to maroon activity in the region of Shrewsbury, New Jersey, from whence it was reported in July, 1779, that about fifty escaped slaves, together with a few whites, had made off with twenty horses and eighty head of cattle.

A slave named Bill of Prince William County, Virginia, was hanged in 1781 for having led others in attacks upon plantations. Reference to similar activity is contained in a letter from Accomack County, Virginia, of September 10, 1781, by one Levin Joynes who declared: "We have had most alarming times this Summer, all along the shore, from a sett of Barges manned mostly by our own Negroes who have run off—These fellows are really dangerous to an individual singled out for their vengeance whose property lay exposed—They burnt several houses."

Letters from prominent Virginians, as Edmund Randolph and Captain John Peyton, told of the same kind of trouble in the summer of 1782. Indeed, reports of serious maroon activity, specifically stated to be due to slaves who escaped during the Revolution, persisted in Georgia and South Carolina until the year 1787.

## CONSPIRACY, REBELLION

Notwithstanding the fact that the Revolutionary period served to loosen the restraints of bondage for many thousands, by increased manumission, greater possibility of flight and, at certain times and places, enlistment in the American army and navy (the story of which will soon be told) the period had its full share of desperate attempts for freedom,

of reckless, heroic protests against enslavement in the form of conspiracies and rebellions.

It would be sanguine indeed to believe that the available records furnish a complete picture of the slave plots and rebellions which occurred during the era of the Revolution (or any other) for discussion of these happenings was strictly taboo and news of them was severely censored. Yet notwithstanding the near certainty that some plots took place that escaped permanent record, and the absolute certainty that the whole truth about many of the recorded outbreaks is not available, one may still declare that existing evidence demonstrates that every year of the Revolution saw at least one slave conspiracy or insurrection.

In the year prior to actual warfare, but during feverish agitational and organizational work, 1774, trouble among the slaves was reported from Massachusetts and Georgia. In Boston, during September, as Abigail Adams, wife of the future second President of the United States, said, there was uncovered "a conspiracy of the Negroes," which she noted, was widespread, and involved at least one white, an Irishman. Little more, however, than this is known, for, declared Mrs. Adams, the affair was "kept pretty private." In November of that same year, as the Georgia (Savannah) *Gazette* of December 7, 1774, laconically noted, there was an uprising in St. Andrew's Parish, Georgia, which resulted in the death of four whites and the wounding of three others before it was suppressed. The paper reported that two of the slave leaders suffered death by burning for daring to struggle for freedom.

The first year of warfare, 1775, witnessed several manifestations on the part of America's slaves of general discontent. The Albany, New York, Committee of Correspondence notes in a meeting of May, 1775, the presence of "Alarm



arisen by suspicion of the Negroes” and in June, having observed that “meetings of Negroes are more frequent of late than usual” ordered all such gatherings forbidden, and had this order printed and widely distributed.

A very considerable conspiracy among the Negroes of Pitt, Craven, and Beaufort counties, North Carolina, was betrayed by the favorite slaves of a Captain Thomas Respass and a Mr. Dayner on July 7, 1775, one day before the rebellion was to have started. Several hundred men were immediately armed and sent scouring the country. Scores of slaves were arrested, questioned, and “a deep laid Horrid Tragic Plan” for rebellion disclosed. Dozens more were jailed (some of whom were armed, and some killed resisting arrest) and the favorite sentence seems to have been “to receive 80 lashes each (and) to have both Ears crap’d.”

A resident of Craven County, one John Simpson, reported as late as July 15 that “We keep taking up, examining and scourging more or less every day.” Again a white man, this time a sea captain named Johnson, was implicated in the Negroes’ schemes for liberation. Finally, so far as 1775 is concerned, a letter from Charles Town, South Carolina, of August 20, makes it clear that a conspiracy to destroy the city by fire was uncovered there, and mentions that a leader of this slave plot “was hanged and burnt for intended sedition” in that city on the 19th of August.

There is proof of serious disturbance among the slaves on Tybee Island, Georgia, early in 1776, but the precise circumstances are vague. It is clear, however, that a Colonel Stephen Bull of Georgia had written to the prominent South Carolinian, Henry Laurens, about this, and Laurens’ reply of March 16, 1776, contains this passage:

Now for the grand we may say awful business contained in your Letter, it is an awful business notwithstanding it has the sanction of Law, to put even fugitive and Rebellious Slaves to death—the prospect is horrible—We think the Council of Safety in Georgia ought to give that encouragement which is necessary to induce proper persons to seize and if nothing else will do to destroy all those Rebellious Negroes upon Tybee Island or wherever they may be found.

Another tantalizingly incomplete passage in an early letter offers proof of disorder among the slaves of New Jersey in the summer of 1776. In a communication from Trenton dated July 5, and written by Samuel Tucker to the President of the Continental Congress, John Hancock, is found this sentence: "The story of the Negroes may be depended upon, so far at least as to their arming and attempting to form themselves, particularly in Somerset county." Just what this attempt cost, in human terms, is not known. The slaves in the neighboring state of Pennsylvania, especially in Bucks County, gave their owners some cause for uneasiness in July, 1776, and special military precautions were taken. Nothing more definite is known, except that one of the Negroes particularly feared was named Samson and was the slave of one Jeremiah Dungan, Jr.

There is evidence of a continuous state of disaffection from January, 1777, to January, 1779, among the slaves of and around Albany County, New York (which contained over 3,800 slaves in 1771, the nearest date for which figures are available). The first year is marked by complaints of misbehavior and trials for an assault upon a soldier, while 1778, as previously noted, witnessed organized efforts to flee on the part of several slaves. Moreover, on March 11, 1778, Lafayette wrote from Albany (to the same Henry Laurens previously mentioned) of a reported plot on the part of the slaves, together with a few whites, to destroy the slave-

owners and fire the city. Attempts at wholesale flight were again reported in May, 1778, and in January, 1779, a warrant was issued for the seizure of a Negro named Tom, slave of Henry Hogan for "endeavouring to Stir up the minds of the Negroes against their Masters and raising Insurrections among them." There is no record of Tom's capture.

A New York newspaper, the *Packet and American Advertiser* of July 1, 1779, gives the only information seen concerning a slave plot in New Jersey in these very few words, "On Sunday night last, it was discovered that the Negroes had it in contemplation to rise and murder the inhabitants of Elizabeth-Town. Many of them are secured in gaol." That's all.

In the fall of 1779 the British-held port of Savannah, Georgia, was besieged, but in vain, by a combined American and French army. The British and Tories, attempting to muster all possible strength, encouraged the Negroes to aid in the fortification work and even to serve in the armed forces with promises of future emancipation. When the Revolutionary army was finally driven off, in October, the Negroes learned that liberty was not to be theirs. Then, in the words of an early historian of Georgia, William B. Stevens, "they grew bold and presumptuous." The author remarks that the danger was "great" and the "insolence" of the slaves "unbearable...for several months" and that finally, though it "was no easy matter," they were "reduced ...to their proper obedience and position." The precise method of this process of reduction is not clear, but we may be certain it was not merely moral suasion!

Existence of trouble in Botetourt County, Virginia, early in 1780 is established by the fact that a slave named Jack was convicted there of insurrectionary activity and was sen-

tenced, in April, to be hanged. In July of 1780 trouble matured once again in the region of Albany, New York, when several slaves, as well as two white men, William Loucks and Frederick Coonradt, were arrested for having plotted rebellion and the burning of the Half Moon settlement outside the city.

A communication from Colonel Wooding of Halifax County, Virginia, of July 21, 1781, in which an urgent appeal for more arms is made refers to fears of the slaves and Tories and notes the fact that while the planters possessed arms, they refused to part with them lest they should be unable to control their slaves. In December of 1781 the slaves in Virginia's capital, Williamsburg, set fire to several of the buildings, including that housing the government, and caused the death of one white man.

Again in Virginia, this time in Accomack County, as appears in a letter from a Colonel Corbin of May 2, 1782, a conspiracy involving slaves and, it was said, Tories, was disclosed and suppressed. There is, finally, record of the payment by North Carolina of £50 to William Bryan of Craven County, on April 23, 1783, "for a Negro man killed in suppressing of Rebel Slaves," but it is not clear just what uprising this has reference to.

#### IV. SERVICE IN THE ARMED FORCES OF THE REVOLUTION

##### THE NAVY

Negroes, free and slave, where and when permitted to do so, played a conspicuous part in the armed forces of the

Revolution. Much red tape had to be cut before the Negro, particularly the slave, was allowed to contribute his services to the Revolutionary army, but the navy, such as it was, did not, apparently, pursue a Jim-Crow policy, and there are several references to Negroes as members of the crews of the nation's infant sea fighters.

It is certain that one of the seamen aboard the Connecticut brig having the ponderous name, "Defence Colony Service" as early as the spring of 1776, was a Negro named George. At least three Negroes, Peter, Brittain, and Daniel Peterson were in the crew of the galley "Trumbull" during the summer of 1776. On the famous Captain David Porter's privateer "Aurora" were three black seamen all known by the then common name (for Negroes) of Cato. Another named Cato fought on the brig "Julius Caesar," and three called Cato Blackney served on the Massachusetts brigs "Hazard," "Deane," and "Prospect" during 1778 and 1779. Another Negro, named Caesar, also served aboard the "Hazard."

A Negro named Jo Blackley and his young son Samuel were, in 1780, aboard the Massachusetts sloop "Morning Star." Another colored youngster who served as a powder boy in this baby navy, one James Forten, was later to acquire fame and fortune as the inventor of an improved mechanism for handling sails, and an outstanding leader in the Abolitionist movement. Other Negro seamen like John Moore, Caesar Cambridge, Joshua Tiffany, Joseph Freeman, Thomas Sambo, and one listed simply as Ben's Freeman, served aboard the "Alliance," "Roebuck," "Confederacy," "Racehorse," and "Adventure."

There are further scattered evidences of services rendered by Negroes to the naval forces of the Revolution. Many members of the crews who manned the defensive coastal galleys

of Georgia, for example, were Negroes. A letter written by George Washington on July 26, 1779, to Major Henry Lee, also indicates the employment of Negroes, for Washington there states, "I have granted a Warrant of 1000 Dollars promised the Negro pilots." Finally, two acts of the Virginia legislature prove similar activities. That body on October 30, 1789, freed two Negroes, Jack Knight and William Boush, for having "faithfully served on board the armed vessels" of Virginia. And on November 14, 1789, it purchased the freedom of Caesar, slave of Mary Tarrant of Elizabeth City, because he had "entered very early into the service of his country, and continued to pilot the armed vessels of this state during the late war."

## THE ARMY

We have all seen pictures depicting the Spirit of '76 with the gallant drummer and fifer swinging along, and other pictures of the poorly clad and under-provisioned army of Washington bleeding and shivering at Valley Forge.

But never are we told that among the Americans who stirred their comrades' spirits with drum and fife were Negroes, and that the snow of Valley Forge was reddened by black men's blood, as well as that of whites. Yet such are the facts. Concretely, for example, we know that the drummer for Captain Benjamin Egbert's company in New York City in March, 1776, was a Negro known simply as Tom. And the fifer (sometimes taking a hand at the drum, too) for Captain John Ford's company of the 27th Massachusetts regiment was Barzillai Lew, native of Groton where he was born in 1743, and where his six-foot frame working at the trade of a cooper was a well known sight. Barzillai Lew drummed and fided and fought his way through the Revo-

lutionary War from almost the moment fighting began (he enlisted May 6, 1775), down to the day, some seven years later, when the arms were stacked. Black men suffered and shivered at Valley Forge, and at least one, Phillip Field, native of Dutchess County, New York, and soldier in Captain Pelton's company of the Second New York regiment, died there in that terrible year of 1778.

Yet, as has already been noted, the existence of slavery created an embarrassing and dangerous contradiction within the Revolutionary forces. This had, as we have seen, the effect of stunting the budding Abolitionist sentiment, and it had a similar effect in producing laws and regulations to hinder the enrollment of Negroes within the ranks of the Revolutionary Army.

The Massachusetts Committee of Safety, in May, 1775, adopted a resolution sanctioning the enlistment of free Negroes, but forbidding slaves to be enrolled on the ground that such action would be "inconsistent with the principles that are to be supported, and reflect dishonor on this colony." In July, 1775, both the Congress of Massachusetts and Horatio Gates, Washington's Adjutant General, issued orders against the enlistment of Negroes.

John Rutledge, a delegate from South Carolina to the Continental Congress, introduced a resolution barring Negroes from use as soldiers in September, 1775, and on October 18 this was approved by that body. Ten days before this a council of general officers of the American army had already decided unanimously against the use of slaves and, by a large majority, against the use of free Negroes as soldiers. This was followed on November 12, 1775, by Washington's order complying with these decisions.

But now reversal of this trend began to set in. Both the legislative and military bodies observed with alarm the flock-

ing of thousands of slaves to the British (particularly after Dunmore's proclamation of November 7, 1775), realized that every bit of man-power would be needed, and had already seen at Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill that the Negroes fought and fought well.

Thus George Washington issued on December 30, 1775, from his headquarters at Cambridge, Massachusetts, the following message: "As the General is informed, that Numbers of Free Negroes are desirous of inlisting, he gives leave to the recruiting Officers to entertain them, and promises to lay the matter before the Congress, who he doubts not will approve it." The next day Washington forwarded a letter to Congress telling of his action, explaining that "free Negroes who have served in this Army, are very much dissatisfied at being discarded" and that he therefore had "presumed to depart from the Resolution (of October 18, 1775), respecting them, and have given license for their being enlisted." In a resolution of January 16, 1776, the Continental Congress approved Washington's action, stating that "the free Negroes who have served faithfully in the army at Cambridge, may be re-enlisted, but no others."

Certain state regulations also affected the question of Negro service in the Revolutionary army. New York, in 1776, permitted men who had been drafted to offer substitutes for themselves in the form of able-bodied men, white or Negro, and this led some slaveholders to offer their slaves as soldiers, the latter's reward being freedom. The Virginia act of 1776 for the organization of the militia provided that "The free mulattoes in the said companies or battalions shall be employed as drummers, fifers, or pioneers." Moreover, the act of this same state passed in May, 1777, for the purpose of completing the troop quota contained this very interesting passage:



And whereas several Negro slaves have deserted from their masters, and under pretence of being free men have enlisted as soldiers: For prevention whereof, Be it enacted, that it shall not be lawful for any recruiting officer within this commonwealth to enlist any Negro or mulatto into the service of this or either of the United States, until such Negro or mulatto shall produce a certificate from some justice of the peace for the county wherein he resides that he is a free man.

In February, 1778, Rhode Island, and in April, 1778, Massachusetts, finding the going getting tougher, the man-supply thinning, and the slaves as willing as ever to fight—provided they received their freedom—passed laws for the enrollment of slaves as soldiers in their state forces. Several hundred Negroes in this way became free. An incidental phrase in a North Carolina law of 1778, passed for the purpose of wiping out the problem of runaway slaves (in which, of course, it failed) demonstrates the fact that Negroes were serving in the army of that state. For this law in making provisions for the capture and disposal of fugitives adds, “nothing herein contained shall deprive of Liberty any Slave who having been liberated & not sold by order of any Court has inlisted in the service of this or the United States.”

It is to be noted that strenuous efforts were made in 1778 and 1779 to persuade South Carolina and Georgia to permit the enrollment of Negroes as soldiers, but these never succeeded (never formally, at any rate, though, as we shall see, Negroes from those states did serve in the Revolutionary Army). Behind this move were prominent individuals like Henry Laurens, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, Generals Lincoln and Greene and even, though not quite wholeheartedly, George Washington. Indeed, the Continental Congress in March, 1779, adopted a resolution urging Georgia and South Carolina, for the sake of saving the cause in

those regions, to permit the enlistment of three thousand Negroes (with Congress paying \$1,000 for each Negro who would, of course, then be free) but both these states shuddered at the proposition and even hinted that they would withdraw from the struggle before acceding to this request. (It may incidentally be noted that, largely because of the great slave population and this reactionary attitude, nearly all of Georgia and eastern South Carolina were conquered and controlled by the British.)

Maryland in October, 1780, and again in May, 1781, passed laws permitting Negroes, slave and free, to be recruited into its armed forces. And finally, the State of New York, in accordance with an act of March 20, 1781, raised two regiments of slaves all of whom were enlisted with the understanding that faithful service for the duration of the war would bring liberty.

The fact of the widespread presence of Negroes in the first armies of the United States is established by the laws and resolutions which have been enumerated. Other evidence in the form of eyewitness accounts also demonstrates how numerous these Negroes were.

A Southern rifleman, for instance, in the ranks of the Continental forces near Boston wrote, in September, 1775, concerning that People's Army, "Such Sermons, such Negroes, such Colonels, such Boys, and such Great Great Grandfathers." Again, a rather aristocratic and wealthy young Pennsylvanian, Alexander Graydon, who served in 1775 in the same army, deprecated its poor discipline and went on to declare, "The only exception I recollect to have seen, to these miserably constituted bands from New England, was the regiment of (John) Glover from Marblehead (Massachusetts). There was an appearance of discipline in this corps....But even in this regiment there were a num-

ber of Negroes, which, to persons unaccustomed to such associations, had a disagreeable, degrading effect."

A letter written by a Hessian officer, Schloezer, in the service of George III, on October 23, 1777, referred, by implication at least, to the disagreeable effect, of another kind, that the presence of these Negro soldiers produced when it declared that "no regiment [among the Americans] is to be seen in which there are not Negroes in abundance and among them are able-bodied, strong, and brave fellows."

References to specific Negroes who performed particularly valiant deeds, and references to specific battles in which the presence of Negroes was marked often occur and prove the important role they played in winning the independence of the United States. Occasionally, too, has come down to us note of the wounding or killing of particular Negroes in certain battles.

The pension lists of the State of Pennsylvania, for example, mention a Negro named John Francis who served in Captain Epple's company of the Third Pennsylvania Regiment and who "had both legs much shattered by grape shot at Battle of Brandywine on 11th of Sept. 1777." A Negro known merely as London was killed in the combined British and Indian siege of Boonesborough, in what is now Kentucky, in 1778. When the British, led by the traitor Benedict Arnold, stormed Fort Griswold on September 6, 1781 and massacred the defenders, two Negroes, Jordan Freeman who before dying managed to kill the British Major Montgomery, and Lambert Latham, were among those killed, the latter with over thirty wounds in his body. On the bloody field of Eutaw in South Carolina on September 8, 1781, were found the bodies of an unnamed Negro soldier of the Maryland line and a British soldier each transfixed by the bayonet of the other. Again, in the decisive

siege of Cornwallis at Yorktown, Virginia, in October, 1781, a Rhode Island Negro, Bristol Rhodes, lost a leg and an arm. Finally, in the last organized effort of the War, the futile march from Saratoga to (it was intended) the British forces at Oswego, New York, in the midst of a fierce winter in February, 1783, Negro soldiers formed the bulk of the American force that was, perhaps by treachery, led off its course, and dozens died or were maimed by freezing.

Negroes were present, too, in the earliest battles of the War. Among those at Lexington and Concord in April, 1775, firing the shots "heard around the world" were, at least, the following Negroes: Caesar Ferrit and his son John of Natick, Samuel Craft of Newton, Peter Salem of Framingham, Pomp Blackman of points unspecified, and Lemuel Haynes, native of West Hartford, Connecticut, and destined to be a famous theologian and minister for white congregations in New England (and, at long last, to have his portrait displayed, in November, 1939, in the museum at Bennington, Vermont).

Many Negroes were present at the never-to-be-forgotten Battle of Bunker Hill of June 17, 1775, and at least one of them, Caesar Brown of Westford, Massachusetts, was there killed in action. The giant cooper, fifer, and drummer, Barzillai Lew, whom we have already met, was present. A Negro named Robin from Sandown, New Hampshire, was there, too, as were the Massachusetts Negroes, Pomp Fisk, Prince Hall, later a pioneer leader in the Negro Masonic movement as well as in the Abolitionist movement, Titus Colburn, Cuff Hayes, Caesar Dickerson, Cato Tufts, Caesar Weatherbee, Seymour Burr, Grant Cooper, Charlestown Eads, Sampson Talbert, Caesar Basom, Salem Poor and Peter Salem. It was the last named who killed the first

Englishman to mount the American breastworks, Major Pitcairn—he who had led the British at Lexington.

And the gallantry of Salem Poor was so conspicuous on this occasion that, on December 5, 1775, it was formally called to the attention of the Massachusetts legislature. This commendation was signed by fourteen officers including Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Nixon and Colonels Jonathan Brewer and William Prescott (he who had flashed the words, "Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes"), and declared that Salem Poor had, under fire, "behaved like an experienced officer, as well as an excellent soldier. To set forth particulars of his conduct would be tedious...in the person of this said Negro centres a brave and gallant soldier."

Negroes were present, too, in the first aggressive action of the American forces, the capturing of Fort Ticonderoga on May 10, 1775. It was cannon captured here by Ethan Allen's Green Mountain Boys and dragged down to Washington's army facing Boston that finally forced the British to evacuate that port. At that important battle were Lemuel Haynes and two native Vermont Negro members of the Green Mountain Boys, Primas Black and Ephraim Blackman.

Scores of other Negroes from Vermont and New Hampshire served in the militia throughout the war, during border forays, attacks on villages and American advances into Canada. As examples, for Vermont may be mentioned Cato Negor, Prince Freeman, Hallam Blackmer, Solomon Scipio, Mingo Black; and for New Hampshire, Fortune Negro, Benajah Blackman, John Blackman, Titus Freeman, Moody Freeman, John Freeman, Mark Blackey, Cesar Black, Titus Willson, Scipio Brown, William Sharper, John Reed, Asa Purham, George Black, Jude Hall, Gloster Watson, Sidon Martin, Jubil Martin, and many listed simply as Peter, Zach,

Richard, Cato, George, Corridon, Paul, Oxford, Oliver, Primas, Dan, Prince, Archelus, and Fortunatus.

In addition to the battles already mentioned—Concord, Lexington, Ticonderoga, Bunker Hill, Brandywine, Boonesborough (1778), Fort Griswold, Eutaw, Yorktown, the attempt at Oswego—definite evidence exists proving the presence of Negroes, as American fighters, at the battles of White Plains, Long Island, Stillwater, Bennington, Red Bank, Bemis Heights, Saratoga, Stony Point, Fort George, Savannah, Rhode Island, Trenton, Princeton, Monmouth, Boonesborough (1780), and Bryan's Station. Of these struggles Negroes were particularly prominent, from the viewpoint of numbers, at Long Island, Red Bank, Rhode Island, Savannah, and the terrible fight at Monmouth, on June 28, 1778, when the treachery of America's first ranking Major-General, Charles Lee, almost brought disaster to the entire Revolutionary cause. The day was saved only by the combined efforts of Wayne, Steuben and Washington, and the stubborn grit and splendid heroism of their men, black and white (together with the woman, Molly Pitcher).

Mention of this white lady, Molly Pitcher, brings to mind the fact that she has been made (quite properly, of course) a national heroine because of her pluck in servicing a cannon on that June day of 1778 after her husband had been disabled. But, significantly enough, practically nothing is said of a Negro lady, Deborah Gannett, who served as a regular soldier, under the name of Robert Shurtliff, in the Fourth Massachusetts Regiment of the Continental Army, not for one day but for some seventeen months, from May 20, 1782 to October 23, 1783. The State of Massachusetts granted this remarkable woman a reward of £34 on January 20, 1792, and declared, on doing this, that "the said Deborah exhibited an extraordinary instance of female heroism."

Other outstanding exploits are worth special mention. Two of the soldiers selected by Washington to take part in the daring crossing of the Delaware River on Christmas Day, 1776, preparatory to the surprise attack upon the Hessians at Trenton, were the Negroes Oliver Cromwell and Prince Whipple, the latter of whom was in the commander's own boat. Again, of the forty-one men and officers selected by Lieutenant Colonel William Barton to take part in the surprise raid on the British headquarters at Newport, Rhode Island, on July 9, 1777, one was a Negro, Tack Sisson. And, after having overcome the guards, the Negro soldier was one of the few who crashed into the building housing the British General, Richard Prescott, and captured both that officer and Major Barrington, and succeeded in bringing both back to the American lines, thus performing one of the most amazing deeds in military annals.

In the allied American and French siege of Savannah in 1779 the French forces included about seven hundred Haitian free Negroes formed in what was known as the Fontages Legion. The allied forces lost over eleven hundred men (including the heroic Pole, Pulaski) and were well-nigh annihilated in a sudden attack of a British force under Lieutenant Colonel Maitland. But this onslaught was met by the Fontages Legion and in, as was said, "the most brilliant feat of the day" these Negroes repulsed the British attack and permitted the Americans to carry out an orderly retreat. Many of these black fighters carried the Revolutionary seed back to their homeland and were important in establishing the Haitian Republic. Among them were Christophe, who was wounded in this battle, and was destined to be the successor of Toussaint L'Ouverture; and Andre, Beauvais, Rigaud, Villatte, Beauregard, and Lam-

bert, each of whom was to rise to high rank in the fight for Haitian liberation.

The feats of Francis Marion, the guerrilla fighter of South Carolina, have long been celebrated, but rarely is it mentioned that among his original group of fighters were Negroes. Late in the war other Negroes, under Barzillai Lew (the same one!) carried on an anti-British guerrilla warfare in New England.

There were, also, several companies formed exclusively of Negroes, as that composed of Massachusetts Negroes and commanded by a white man named Samuel Lawrence, and that formed by Connecticut Negroes (four of whom were named Liberty, and three named Freedom) under Colonel Humphreys, and that formed by Rhode Island Negroes under Colonel Olney. In addition, there was one company of Massachusetts Negroes, called "The Bucks of America," which was Negro right up to and including the commander, one Middleton. Moreover, record of at least one Negro officer, in a mixed company, has been discovered in the person of a corporal named Perley Rogers in the Second Massachusetts Regiment commanded by Colonel John Bailey.

It may, indeed, be declared that Negroes from every state fought in the ranks of the Revolutionary army. As a matter of fact, in the case of a few states, like Maryland, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire, one would have difficulty in naming many hamlets, villages, or cities from which some Negro soldier did not enlist.

A good example of this is the State of Connecticut (which contained about 6,500 Negroes in 1774) whose records were especially well-kept, and show Negro volunteers from at least forty-seven different localities within that state, from



Ashford to Woodstock, from Branford to Woodbury, from Canaan to Winchester. There is, even for the State of Georgia, positive proof that at least five Negroes from that region fought against the British, these being Daniel Cresswell, John Maffett, Hugh Hall, one simply named Wood, and Austin Dabney. The last named was not only freed for his particularly courageous behavior, having conducted himself "with a bravery and fortitude which would have honored a freeman," but was awarded an annual pension of ninety-six dollars and given one hundred and twelve acres of land. At least one South Carolina Negro, John Eady, also distinguished himself in the Revolutionary Army and likewise received his freedom and land.

A final piece of evidence concerning Negroes in the Revolutionary army appears in a very interesting enactment passed by the Virginia legislature in October, 1783. It is self-explanatory and reads: "Whereas it hath been represented to the general assembly that during the course of the war many persons in this state had caused their slaves to enlist in certain regiments or corps raised within the same, having tendered such slaves to the officers appointed to recruit forces within the state, as substitutes for free persons, whose lot or duty it was to serve in such regiments or corps, at the same time representing to such recruiting officers that the slaves so enlisted by their direction and concurrence were freemen; and it appearing further to this assembly, that on the expiration of the term of enlistment of such slaves that the former owners have attempted again to force them to return to a state of servitude, contrary to the principles of justice, and to their own solemn promise," and since, said Virginia, such Negroes, by their service, "have thereby of course contributed towards the establishment of American liberty and independence," the Attorney

General of the state was instructed to see to it that those Negroes remained free.

In summing up this phase of the story one may say in full confidence that the number of Negroes who served as regular soldiers in the American forces during the Revolution was, at a conservative estimate, five thousand, to which may be added the approximately seven hundred Negroes who fought in the ranks of this country's French ally.

### THE NEGROES AS SPIES

Nor does that complete the account of the direct aid given by the Negro people to this cause for excellent evidence exists proving that Negroes were at times invaluable in the capacity of spies. An unnamed Negro, for example, was largely responsible for the American victory at Edenton, North Carolina, on December 8, 1775, when Colonel Woodford defeated a British force under Captain Fordyce, suffering himself the loss of but one man while accounting for one hundred redcoats. This occurred because a Negro had, under Colonel Woodford's orders, entered the British camp and told, in such a convincing fashion, of a weak, disorganized American force, that the English hastily attacked what in reality was a well-prepared and strategically placed American force. Of this engagement, incidentally, the late historian, William E. Dodd, wrote, "It was a godsend to the revolutionists of Virginia; it stirred drooping spirits as they had not been stirred since the news of Lexington."

Anthony Wayne's surprise attack upon and rather easy capture of the Stony Point, New York fort, in July, 1779, was made possible by the spying activity of a Negro slave, Pompey, property of an American, Captain Lamb. Pompey, whose invaluable activity here gained him his freedom, ob-

tained the British password, and used this in aiding a detachment of Americans to overcome the British guards, thus leading to the surprise and seizure of the stronghold together with considerable supplies and six hundred prisoners.

Rhode Island, in 1782, freed a Negro, Quaco Honeyman, as a reward for his important spying activity, and South Carolina in 1783 freed the wife and child of a deceased Negro whose efforts in that direction had also been valuable. Virginia, in 1786, freed James, slave of William Armistead, because he had, in 1781, as the act of emancipation declares, entered "into the service of the Marquis la Fayette, and at the peril of his life found means to frequent the British camp, and thereby faithfully executed important commissions entrusted to him by the marquis." The same state in 1792 freed another Negro, Saul, property of a George Kelly, for certain unspecified "very essential services rendered to the Commonwealth during the late war."

## CONCLUSION

We have attempted to show that the activities of a homogeneous one-fifth of the population of the United States during her first Revolution were varied and important and must be understood if one is fully to comprehend not only this vital phase of the Negro's history, but also the American Revolution itself.

All the manifold efforts of these five hundred thousand people—their court actions and petitions, their conspiracies and uprisings, their flight and guerrilla warfare, their service in the infant nation's navy and army as pilots, seamen,

soldiers, and spies—had as their fundamental motivation the achievement of equality and liberty, the full realization, in practice, of the Declaration of Independence.

It has been shown that some very definite advances in this direction were made, particularly in the North, during the Revolution, and that this, together with service in the armed forces, did lead to the liberation of several thousand slaves. Yet it was demonstrated that the movement fell short, was compromised, and that because of this tens of thousands of slaves felt impelled to seek freedom by flight or rebellion. It must, moreover, be declared that this failure came close to bringing victory to the English, and that it is probable the British would indeed have won had not their own position made it impossible for them to wage a really thorough-going war of liberation.

It appears, also, safe to say that the failure to carry out fully the freeing of the Negro people led to the postponement for many bloody months of the final victory of the American forces. And it is certain that the failure to root out this cancer of slavery from the body of America led, in less than eighty years, to a most sanguinary Civil War, and required the loss of half a million lives before the second American Revolution could complete the task neglected by the first.

And the failure of that second American Revolution to fully achieve its end—the economic security, and the complete liberty and equality of the masses, Negro and white, of the South—remains to this day as a huge parasite devouring the well-being of those masses, poisoning the social life of the nation, and lowering the living standards of all Americans.

That failure has led today to an almost total absence of democracy in the South and to a consequent vitiating

and obstructing by the Dixie Demagogues (put into office by a restricted electorate comprising from four to twenty per cent of the population) of every worthwhile, progressive measure desired by the people of America as a whole.

The Negro people have always struggled and are now valiantly struggling for their liberation, and it behooves all Americans to come to their support, not only in order to have justice done for some fifteen million American citizens, but also in order to make secure and to advance their own economic and political well-being.

In the South today tremendous mass movements having as their fundamental aim the establishment of political and economic democracy are developing and maturing. The Congress of Industrial Organizations, the National Negro Congress, the Abolish Peonage Committee, the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, the Southern Negro Youth Conference, the battles against the poll tax and lynching are each organizing and moving millions of Southerners, Negro and white, towards the achievement of decency and prosperity in their own region—and thereby in the nation as a whole. For it must ever be remembered that while the victory of the people is inevitable and their will is irresistible, it is so only when they are indivisible. Divided the masses are vulnerable, united they are unconquerable.

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